Divining Jazz

By John Salmon

Yes, jazz was born in some raunchy places. Brothels, gin joints, speakeasies, and clubs of the early decades of the twentieth century – in New Orleans, Kansas City, Chicago, New York, and everywhere in between – became the breeding ground from which the sultry, sassy musical language known as jazz first thrived. Its first practitioners were Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller and others. They created music whose titles and lyrics, laden with sexual innuendo ("Big Butter and Egg Man," "Struttin' with Some Barbecue") and irreverence ("Your Feet's Too Big," "Dead Man Blues") might have made our Victorian grandparents blush had they been hip to the lingo.

But jazz soon transcended its shady origins. Duke Ellington's extended fantasies for large jazz orchestra, for example, his 1931 "Creole Rhapsody," paralleled the tone poems of Liszt and Bruckner in their scope and programmatic meaning. George Gershwin's enormously popular 1924 "Rhapsody in Blue" set the stage for other ambitious jazz works, such as James P. Johnson's "Yamekraw" which debuted in 1927 with Fats Waller soloing with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. Jazz composers sought legitimacy. By the late 1930's, the big band music of Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Glenn Miller became America's popular music. The risqué origin of this "swing" music was not a concern, even if many a mother fretted over the wild, earthy dancing that such music inspired.

With the emergence of bebop after World War II, middle-class Americans felt the threat of a counter-cultural musical language, intentionally complex and practiced by a surprisingly high number of drug addicts. Alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, whose chromatic and virtuosic playing became the new norm, became a role model for the drugged-out beatnik. Compared to the relatively innocuous dangers of the corporeally hot dances of the big-band era, the bebop culture posed a far more serious threat to diehard jazz fans anxious to emulate the hip. Alas, too many great jazz musicians, such as pianist Bill Evans and trumpeter Chet Baker, succumbed to drugs. Their health, not to mention their careers, suffered. No wonder many Americans of the 1950's, seeking the stability of the suburbs, flinched when their sons and daughters wanted to play jazz.

"When I play jazz, freedom and joy are paramount."

However, the dangers of the drug-saturated world of the beboppers seemed tame by the time the 60's rolled around. The revolution of Haight-Ashbury, Woodstock, and the tuned-out, turned-on generation promoted a culture-wide usage of drugs. Many of America's youth experimented with marijuana. Arguably this was benign compared to the heroin addiction of so many jazzers, like Parker and Evans. Perhaps it is no coincidence that jazz, so dangerous in the 50's but absolutely innocent in the decade of the Vietnam War, made an entry into academe, and hence a step toward respectability, in the 1960's. Jazz programs started to pop up in the curricula of many universities, where it was once forbidden.

Having grown up in a relatively sheltered, definitely upper-middle-class white culture in Fort Worth, Texas, I came to "consciousness" in the 1960's. I was far more influenced by the injustices of segregation than the temptations of drugs. Even as a child, I was dumbstruck by the two water fountains at the local grocery store, one that said "White" and the other "Colored." I empathized with black people and loved their music. It was natural that, even as I took classical piano lessons, I would play jazz.

Significantly, one of my earliest influences, and one with whom I have become increasingly active in my later professional life, was Dave Brubeck. At first I was

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John Salmon Photograph by Stacey Haines

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struck by his odd meters and intriguing use of classical forms. When I was twelve, my mother bought me a book of transcriptions of Brubeck tunes, including the famous "Take Five" and "Blue Rondo a la Turk." Learning that Brubeck had cancelled tours of the South in the early 1960's because promoters did not want to have his black bassist on stage heightened my appreciation of Brubeck.

But an even stronger note resonated in my young, Christian life with Brubeck's 1967 oratorio, *The Light in the Wilderness*, which blended middle-eastern melodies, atonal procedures similar to Schoenberg's music, and jazz. That work proved pivotal in my musical and personal life. Here was a jazzman, a committed family man, a non-drug addict, who expressed his innermost religious sentiments through jazz! It was a revelation for me. Whenever I hear the song "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled," the centerpiece around which *The Light in the Wilderness* was composed, I hear the perfect musical embodiment of that Biblical counsel–"Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God. Believe also in me." (*The Gospel according to St. John* 14:1): reassuring, joyful, even swinging!

I am moved to similar religious experiences by John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," a recording that is as far removed from the glib, giddy lyrics of Fats Waller as a church is from a pool hall. But I also hear God's voice when Sarah Vaughan sings "Cherokee"–such purity and ease, Sarah transcending the barline the same way God transcends time and space.

Thomas Taylor
Photograph by Stacey Haines

When I play jazz, freedom and joy are paramount. Improvising is much like "floating freely in the hands of God," a phrase I once heard a Catholic priest use to describe our relationship to the Almighty. The improviser must surrender personal volition to the "greater good," namely the groove. This sounds a lot like Zen, but it is also a Christian concept "He who loses his life for my sake will find it." (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew* 10:39).

> *"Jazz, perhaps more than other musical styles, seeks what is new, fresh, and genuine"*

For me jazz is best when it is a communal experience. My riff on the piano is answered by drummer Thomas Taylor, or I will start a syncopated lick that bassist Steve Haines picks up instantly. And then the audience starts to dig it! They sway with the beat, they clap after solos, they shout "Yeah!" This ritual and syntax originate from black churches where the pastor's proclamations are followed by the congregation's group "Amen," where cadence and momentum are experienced together, where life's energies work in harmony.

The titles of some of my compositions for my jazz trio reflect my deepest convictions. "Cogito Ergo..." is a reference to Descartes's famous pronouncement *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), the basis for his philosophy. Notice that my title supplants "I am" with ellipsis dots, a reflection of my own doubt about just what *cogito* (I think) implies. The musical character of the piece is wild, frenetic, and spontaneous–*not* the kind of music one would associate with the most rational of the rationalistic philosophers. Surely Descartes's first metaphysical step, assuming he exists because he notices neural activity, required a primordial, even Kierkegaardian "leap of faith." The meditations of many a truth-seeker are surely couched in such turmoil.

My piece "Mari Pino," dedicated to my wife of twenty-two years, Mari Pino del Rosario, makes sense only if you know her. She's a Spaniard, born and raised in the Canary Islands but brought up a Southern Baptist. Those statistics alone qualify her as "out of the norm." She is also fiercely independent, a respected scholar of Hispanic literature, and an advocate for many women's issues. There is nothing old-fashioned about her...and therein lies the irony of my composition, which has an old-timey slow-stride feel to it: it's not the Mari Pino other people know! To me, there is a warmth, comfort, ease, and intimacy about her that defies her rigorously intellectual persona. When she first heard it and noticed that the opening melodic strain resembles the beginning of "Mack the Knife" (the opening line of which is "When the shark bites..."), she was not amused and gave me a thump on the back of my head. Now, I am happy to report, she really likes the piece, as do our four-year-old twin daughters.

Steve Haines
Photograph by Stacey Haines

Jazz, perhaps more than other musical styles, seeks what is new, fresh, and genuine. It has proven a remarkably versatile idiom, capable of defining and bringing to life a host of human emotions. As art, jazz can be architecturally refined, harmonically rich, and texturally diverse. And it's the only music that swings! It is a musical language as earthy and heavenly as the blues, full of human longing and Godly comfort. It is 100% human, 100% divine.

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